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SUBJECT: AMB. PROMOTES HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN IMBABURA
PROVINCE

¶1. Summary: During a February 7 trip to Imbabura province, two hours north of Quito, the Ambassador toured a U.S. military Medical Readiness Exercise (MEDRETE), met with the indigenous mayor of Otavalo and town councilors, toured a water system project sponsored by AID, and visited a Peace Corps site. The MEDRETE was covered extensively by the media, where the Ambassador expressed President Bush's message that we want to be "partners for a better life." The mayor outlined the successes of his USAID-funded water project and discussed his economic development plans. At the Peace Corps site, the Ambassador received an explanation of how, with USDA PL-480 funds and the help of the Peace Corps volunteer, the community has dramatically increased its income and quality of life. End Summary.

MEDRETE Receives Press Coverage

¶2. The Ambassador toured a MEDRETE site in the heavily indigenous city of Otavalo on February 7. The MEDRETE was sponsored by U.S. and Ecuadorian Air Forces, with logistical support from the Ecuadorian Army, and provided free medical services in the areas of general medicine, optometry, and dentistry to more than 8,500 local patients over 10 days. On February 7, the Otavalo MEDRETE attended 1,501 patients, a new record for patients treated in one day during a MEDRETE held in Ecuador. The Ambassador donated a box of books to the school that was hosting the MEDRETE. Four Peace Corps volunteers helped by interpreting between the doctors and patients.

¶3. After the MEDRETE, the Ambassador held a press conference where she highlighted President Bush's State of the Union message, especially the message that "we want to be partners for a better life" in response to questions from journalists on why the U.S. sponsors these events. Saturation coverage on the February 7 evening news shows also included interviews with Ecuadorian beneficiaries and U.S. military medical personnel. The Ambassador, when asked by the media about tensions between the Ecuadorian and Colombian governments, stressed that the two governments should maintain an open dialogue.

Mayor Highlights Water System Project Success

¶4. The Ambassador met with Otavalo mayor Mario Conejo and nine town councilors in the municipal building. Later, she toured a municipal water laboratory. In the meeting, the mayor described the successes of the water system project, his goals for the municipality, and visa issues. He thanked

the Ambassador for USAID's partial financial support (over \$200,000) to the municipality of Otavalo for improvements and extension of coverage for its water system. Besides the municipality contribution, local citizens also volunteered their time and are paying a 800 percent tariff increase for the improved water service. The improvements to the water system have resulted in a twelve percent savings in the use of water. Currently, 98 percent of the municipality has potable water, up from 48 percent, a significant achievement.

¶15. The mayor said improving basic services was one of his primary goals. He contrasted his own pure motives with those of other politicians seeking only high profile projects to increase their publicity. (Comment: This was probably a jab at his rival, Presidential aspirant Auki Tituana, mayor of neighboring Cotacachi.) The mayor also claimed to work cooperatively with the town councilors, with 95 percent of the town council's decisions reached by consensus. The mayor said he seeks to promote economic development in his city and asked if his citizens, known for their international sales of handicrafts, could form an organized enterprise and receive U.S. business visas in this manner. A town councilor described a trafficking in persons project she was interested in developing.

Dramatic Improvement in Local Cheese

¶16. The Ambassador visited the site of a Peace Corps volunteer working between the cities of Otavalo and Cayambe, in Eugenio Espejo. The volunteer applied for and received USDA PL-480 funds to improve the product quality, hygiene standards, and marketing of the local cheese production factory. The Ambassador toured the factory and sampled the cheese, while listening to locals describe the cheese

production process. The Ambassador then toured the community-run veterinary medicine chest which the Peace Corps volunteer also started and visited the volunteers' home. Finally, the Ambassador visited the community school where the volunteer had arranged for a group of American high school students to come to Ecuador to build a multi-use sports facility.

Comment

¶17. The Ambassador's trip offered a great opportunity to highlight U.S. military humanitarian assistance, receiving widespread media coverage due to the Ambassador's presence. It also provided a useful opportunity to encourage bilateral dialogue with Colombia, and to encourage consensus-building at the local level. The Peace Corps project showed how much goodwill can be created by a single volunteer's dedication. We will follow up with the Otavalo town councilor regarding the trafficking in persons project.

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